**Abstract**

Many studies indicate that the leading method for teaching a musical instrument today is the traditional, classical one: learning to play notes. When this is the principal skill that is imparted in teaching an instrument, other skills, such as improvisation and playing by ear, are almost totally neglected or are limited to a particular genre, such as jazz. Although many scholars stress the importance of additional skills that any musician needs, irrespective of genre or instrument, many teachers stick to teaching works from notes, almost without exception.

This study examines the way we music teachers are educating the next generation of musicians and suggests that we reexamine the form of study and the skills that we wish to develop in our pupils. The purpose of the study is to examine the effect of instrumental instruction via skills such as improvisation and playing by ear as against reading notes at the outset of music lessons, and the effect of these skills on the sense of release and freedom in the adult musician’s playing.

Seventy-six musicians participated in this study. They filled in questionnaires composed of twenty-two closed items (in which participants were allowed to add details in an open form). The questionnaire was divided into three main parts. The items in Part 1 probed the participants’ background in learning to play an instrument and asked whether they learned in the traditional manner or in alternative ways. The middle part of the questionnaire investigated the skills that were gained in the lessons and asked which of them predominated in instrumental instruction over the years. (The skills examined were reading notes, improvising, playing by ear, motion, and singing.) In the final part of the questionnaire, the participants evaluated themselves, noting whether they were proficient in the various skills as adult musicians and players of instruments today. The purpose of this step was to determine how free and open the participants felt in playing spontaneously, mostly in the company of others, as against a sense of closedness and avoidance of situations that are not known in advance or for which preparations were not made. In analyzing the data, the participants were sorted into two groups: “open and uninhibited” and “closed and inhibited.” In addition to the questionnaires, twenty-one participants were interviewed in order to further elucidate their responses to the questionnaire and yield a clearer picture of some of the details.

The study’s hypothesis is that learning to play an instrument at an early age in a way that centers solely on reading and the study of notes, without developing improvisation and playing-by-ear skills and encouraging creativity, induces fixation and the avoidance of uninhibited playing without notes among adult musicians.

At the general level, it was found that the traditional classical method of instrumental instruction by notes is indeed popular among the participants and that a large majority of them received a traditional education of this kind. The participants in this group admitted that they avoid spontaneous playing and feel uncomfortable about playing by ear or improvising. They were placed in the “closed and inhibited” category. When the skills learned in their instrumental lessons were checked, it was found that, indeed, members of the “open and uninhibited” group developed additional skills, such as improvisation and playing by ear, more meaningfully than did those in the “closed and inhibited” group. In a more thorough examination of the results, the data were evaluated from different angles and the information was cross-referenced in various ways. Here, too, a connection was found almost every time between skills imparted in music lessons and the level of openness and lack of inhibition that the participating musicians felt about their instruments today, in a way that fits the hypothesis of this study.

It was also found that a connection exists between the musical instrument, the number of instruments that the participant plays, and the age at which the participant began to learn the instrument and her or his level of openness today. Significantly, pianists constitute the largest group of participants who state that they do not feel open, free, and uninhibited in playing their instrument in situations of spontaneity and improvisation. They are also the largest group that learned in the traditional way, with reading notes as a meaningful and central part of lesson content, and other skills neglected. In contrast, guitarists made up a large percentage of the musicians who were defined as “open and uninhibited” and who learned to play in less formal ways. As for the age at which they began to learn the instrument, those who started to learn their instruments relatively late in life feel less open in playing uninhibitedly today than do those in the corresponding group that began to learn an instrument at an early age. Contrarily, the number of instruments that a participant plays appears to have no effect whatsoever on the sense of playing uninhibitedly. That is, there is no proof that a musician who learns to play more than one instrument will feel less open and uninhibited in improvisation or playing by ear.

The interviews brought six important matters to the fore:

1. Criticism of the method of study invoked at the beginning of music education, manifested mainly in frustration over the inability to play the instrument uninhibitedly today.
2. The role of personality/genetics in the sense of freedom and lack of inhibition in relating to the instrument, and its opposite—a sense of closedness and inhibition.
3. A sense of being free and uninhibited as against closedness and avoidance in the direct context of the instrument and the style of playing.
4. Slight confusion in the interviews—some participants were reluctant to divulge their level of openness and gave vague answers.
5. Correspondence between the development of instrumental skills at an early age and the sense of being able to play the instrument freely and uninhibitedly today.
6. The effect of age at the beginning of instrumental instruction on the sense of freedom and lack of inhibition.

In this part of the study, the interviews lent greater clarity to some responses to the questionnaire and allowed my analysis to be more thorough.

In sum, my analysis of the participants’ responses to the questionnaire and in the interviews leaves no doubt that the method of study and the skills taught at an early age strongly affect the sense of openness, freedom, and lack of inhibition that musicians feel about playing their instruments as adults. By implication, music teachers bear immense responsibility for the form and manner in which they choose to educate young musicians who receive instrumental instruction from them. Encouraging creativity, improvisation, playing by ear, song, or motion in instrumental lessons at an early age will undoubtedly lead the beginning music student to become an adult musician who can express him or herself via the instrument and use it freely and enjoyably.